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AUTHOR Ramirez, Arnulfo G.
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ABSTRACT

Communicative competence is often characterized as an integrated control of language reflected in the speaker's ability to understand and use language appropriately for communication in various situations. The theoretical basis for the communicative competence construct is the anthropological, sociolinguistc, and pragmatic view of language. Communicative competence can be characterized as various systems of knowledge and skills. Some see it as grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence; others see it as a combination of roles, settings, topics, functions, notions, and language activities. Measurement of communicative proficiency faces many problems, some related to the vagueness of the concept or trait to be measured. Measurement problems are compounded by the fact that the usual measurement of communicative competence is based on global rating scale approaches, while linguistic competence is generally measured by a discrete item method. The presumed difference between measured linguistic and communicative competence may actually reflect a difference in measurement techniques. Sone of the challenges in constructing communicative competence tests are the resolution of the reliablity/validity tension in language testing; the accuracy/fluency distinction; questions of content; and the test-taking event itself, which may be affected by a number of extralinguistic factors. (MSE)

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Dimensions of Communicative Proficiency

Arnulfo G. Ramirez

The concept of language proficiency--what it is to "know" a language--is influenced by such aspects as views regarding language itself, developments in language testing theory, and educational concerns. Language, for example, can be seen as a system, consisting of various levels--phonology, vocabulary, and grammar, which are integrated to perform a number of functions--directing, informing, requesting, and apologizing. These functions, in turn, are performed in different situations (home/school/airport) involving different participants (adult/child/friend/stranger) while discussing various topics.

Communicative proficiency[1] in this case will be discussed in terms of the following areas: (1) the language skills-components perspective, (2) the communicative view of language, (3) components of communicative proficiency, and (4) problem areas associated with the assessment of communicative proficiency.

The Language Skills-Components Approach

Recent development in language testing has been devoted to characterizing the different linguistic aspects tapped by various tests (cf., Davis, 1978; Jones & Spolsky, 1975; Oller, 1979; Oller & Perkins, 1978, 1980; Valette, 1977). Language testing associated with the behavioral-structural model of language learning divides language skills according to linguistic levels (phonology, morphology, syntax, vocabulary) and into performance skills which are either receptive (reading, listening) or active (writing, speaking). These skills are usually tested according to a discrete point approach which allows for high (specific item based) reliability.

Linguistic competence usually refers to the ability to produce (and recognize) structures which are grammatically correct. Davies (1978, p. 149) describes this ability as an "analytical discrete" skill which is reflected in the speaker's mastery of the formal grammar of the language. Palmer (1979, p. 170) views this competence in terms of a "compartmentalized control" of the language.

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[1]Communicative proficiency is used here as performance ability in addition to the speaker-hearer's knowledge of the language.

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The Communicative Approach

Communicative competence is often characterized as an "integrated control" (Palmer, 1979, p. 170) of language reflected in the speaker's ability to understand and use language appropriately to communicate in various situations. The theoretical basis for the communicative competence construct is the anthropological, sociolinguistic and pragmatic view of language. The testing of communicative competence tends to be associated with a global ability (integrating the different elements of language--grammar, vocabulary, etc.) involved in communicative acts--giving directions, requesting permission, apologizing, etc. In most instances, the specific situations are described by the examiner and rating scales are used to evaluate how effectively the examinee performed the communicative act.

Definitions of communicative competence are often relatively broad (e.g., ability to adapt the totality of one's communicative resources, both linguistic and functional (i.e., extra-linguistic and paralinguistic) to a given situation (Legarreta, 1979, p. 523). Recent attempts undertaken by communication experts (Wiemann & Backlund, 1980) or applied linguists (Canale & Swain, 1980) to define the concept of communicative competence have only demonstrated the multiplicity of possible components. It seems that at least three distinct traditions of inquiry are merging in the communicative competence field: (1) psychologists and communication specialists view communicative competence primarily as the ability to understand, organize and convey information (e.g., Flavell et al., 1973), (2) in the tradition of philosophers of language like Austin (1962) or Searle (1969), communicative competence is viewed as the ability to perform speech acts efficiently, and (3) sociolinguistic tradition, itself often influenced by the philosophy of language mentioned under 2 above, defines communicative competence with regard to situational appropriateness of language use (Hymes, 1971; Shuy, 1979).

Components of Communicative Proficiency

Communicative proficiency can be characterized in terms of various systems of knowledge and skills. Canale's (1981) framework includes four areas:

1. Grammatical competence: mastery of the language code (verbal or nonverbal), thus concerned with such features as lexical items, and rules of sentence formation, pronunciation, and literal meaning.

2. Sociolinguistic competence: mastery of appropriate language use in different sociolinguistic contexts, with emphasis on appropriateness of meanings (e.g., attitudes, speech acts, and propositions) and appropriateness of forms (e.g., register, non-verbal expression, and intonation).

3. Discourse competence: mastery of how to combine and interpret forms and meanings to achieve a unified spoken or written text in different genres by using (a) cohesion devices to relate utterance forms (e.g., pronouns, transition words, and parallel structures) and (b) coherence rules to organize meanings (e.g., repetition, progression, consistency, and relevance of ideas).

4. Strategic competence: mastery of verbal and nonverbal strategies (a) to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to insufficient competence or to performance limitations (e.g., strategies such as use of dictionaries, paraphrase, and gestures) and (b) to enhance the effectiveness of communication (e.g., deliberately slow and soft speech for rhetorical effect).
(Canale, 1984, p. 112)

This model incorporates the oral and written modalities of language within various communicative situations (e.g., writer to reader as friend or stranger; speaker to listener--student to teacher or teacher to teacher). At the same time, the linguistic component interacts with systems of knowledge and skills (e.g., knowledge of the world, general perception strategies) as well as with a theory of human action involving personality factors and decision making processes.

The Council of Europe model (Van Ek, 1975) represents a multiple interpretation of proficiency combining roles (e.g., stranger/friend, psychologically neutral/sympathetic), settings (e.g., airport, friend's home, party), topics (e.g., personal, weather), functions (e.g., imparting and seeking factual information, expressing and finding out emotional attitudes, socializing), notions (e.g., spatial-location/distance/motion, temporal-speed/frequency/lateness), and language activities (speaking, listening, reading, and writing).

Communicative Proficiency: Some Problem Areas

The measurement of communicative proficiency faces many problems, some of them related to the already mentioned vagueness of the concept or trait to be measured. The measurement problems are compounded by the fact that the usual measurement of communicative competence is based on global rating scale

approaches, while linguistic competence is generally measured in tests using a discrete item method. As a result, the suggestion has been made that in many situations a presumed difference between measured linguistic and communicative competence may reflect a difference in method of measurement rather than in the trait or constructs being measured (e.g., Corinan & Upshur, 1978; Stevenson, 1979).

Morrow (1977), for example, suggests a "discrete feature" approach to testing communicative skills in order to isolate nine variables which can have a bearing on a speech act. He suggests isolating the following aspects: setting, topic, function, modality, pre-supposition, role, formality, and status. Following are three samples which focus on three sociolinguistic dimensions associated with a speech act.

Sample One: Presentation: Oral (tape recorded or spoken)
Type: Identification
Present: Excuse me, do you know where the nearest post-office is, please?

1. (Setting) Where might one ask you that question?
   a. In your house.
   b. In your office.
   c. In the street.
   d. In a restaurant.

2. (Topic) What is the person asking you about?
   a. The price of stamps.
   b. The age of the post-office.
   c. The position of the post-office.
   d. The size of the post-office.

3. (Function) Why is the person speaking to you?
   a. To ask your advice.
   b. To thank you.
   c. To ask for information.
   d. To warn you.

(Morrow, 1977, p. 29)

One of the challenges in constructing communicataive competence tests is the resolution of what has been referred to as the reliability/validity tension in language testing (Davies, 1978). Highly reliable discrete item tests which present language out of context lack the communicative situation and therefore have little face validity. Tests which elicit genuine communicative types of responses have the validity but often depend for their reliability on inter-rater agreements based on rating scales.

Another area of concern is the accuracy/fluency distinction. Higgs and Clifford (1982) have proposed a trisectional view of communicative competence which includes statements about the linguistic functions that a speaker is able to express, about the content (topic/areas) that can be discussed, and about the degree of accuracy in conveying the message.

> Thus, with respect to oral proficiency, pronunciation and the fluency/integrative factors directly relate to functions; the sociolinguistic/cultural and vocabulary factors directly relate to context/content; while grammar predictably relates directly to accuracy.
>
> (Lowe, 1985, pp. 28-29)

This view of communicative competence is reflected in the A.C.T.F.L. guidelines, which describe speaking, listening, reading, writing, and cultural skills in relation to function, context, and accuracy. Figure 1 outlines the five levels of oral proficiency adapted from the Interagency Language Round Table (I.L.R.). Thus, judgments of an individual's proficiency must take into account all three factors that are interrelated hierarchically.

Communicative proficiency can be described from various perspectives--a behavioral-structural view of language or a sociolinguistic consideration involving the appropriate use of language ("integrated control") in different situations. Communicative proficiency can also be characterized in terms of various components--Canale's fourfold concept or the Council of Europe's multiple categories framework. The particular characterization of proficiency creates challenges in the construction of communicative competence tests. Highly reliable discrete item tests usually present language out of context and thus face a validity problem. Approaches which elicit genuine communicative types of responses are valid measures but often depend for their reliability on inter-rater agreement based on rating scales. At the same time, the issues of accuracy and fluency need to be addressed. Beyond this, there are questions of content (knowledge of topics, subjects, and activities) and the test-taking event itself, which may be affected by a number of extralinguistic factors.

FIGURE 1: FUNCTIONAL TRISECTION OF ORAL PROFICIENCY LEVELS

Level	Functions	Content	Accuracy
ILR Speaking Level	Task accomplished, attitudes expressed, tone conveyed.	Topics, subject areas, activities, and jobs addressed.	Acceptability, quality, and accuracy of message conveyed.
5	Functions equivalent to an Educated Native Speaker (ENS).	All subjects.	Performance equivalent to Educated Native Speaker (ENS).
4	Able to tailor language to fit audience, counsel, persuade, negotiate, represent a point of view, and interpret for dignitaries.	All topics normally pertinent to professional needs.	Nearly equivalent to ENS. Speech is extensive, precise, appropriate to every occasion with only occasional errors.
3	Can converse in formal and informal situations, resolve problem situations, deal with unfamiliar topics, provide explanations, describe in detail, support opinions, and hypothesize.	Practical, social, professional, and abstract topics, particular interests, and special fields of competence.	Errors virtually never interfere with understanding and rarely disturb the ENS. Only sporadic errors in basic structures.
2	Able to fully participate in casual conversations; can express facts; give instructions; describe, report on, and provide narration about current, past, and future activities.	Concrete topics such as own background, family, and interests, work, travel, and current events.	Understandable to NS not used to dealing with foreigners; sometimes miscommunicates.
1	Can create with the language; ask and answer questions, participate in short conversations.	Everyday survival topics and courtesy requirements.	Intelligible to a NS used to dealing with foreigners.
0	No functional ability.	None.	Unintelligible.

(Lowe, 1985: 28)

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